

# Debuccalization in Icelandic: the spread and nature of a new phonological variant

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## Today's talk

- Introduction to *höggmæli*, a debuccalization phenomenon in Icelandic
  - Description based on Sigurjónsdóttir's BA thesis (2021)
  - Distribution in RÍN in the 80s
- Research questions and hypotheses
  - Its current distribution in regards to age and geographical regions
  - Its connection to *n-framburður*; a deletion of /rt/
- Results and discussions
- Conclusions

## Introduction to *höggmæli*

- Unaspirated plosives in coda position are replaced with a glottal stop when preceding a nasal
  - Barn: [partn] → [parʔn]/[paʔn]
  - Vagnar: [vaknar] → [vaʔnar] (wagons)
  - Hefna: [hɛpna] → [hɛʔna] (to revenge)
- Liquids may cause the same effect, but this is not as common (Árnason, 2018)
  - Varla: [vartla] → [varʔla]/[vaʔla] (hardly)
  - Regla: [regla] → [rɛʔla] (rule)
- Speakers with *höggmæli* may also have a tendency of pre-glottalization in the same environment (Sigurjónsdóttir, 2021, see also Árnason, 2005:157).
  - Barn: [parʔtn]
  - Varla: [varʔtla]

# Debuccalization

- Debuccalization: a weakening phenomenon where consonants are reduced to laryngeals (O'Brien, 2020), a deletion of oral articulatory features
  - Cockney English: voiceless stops → ʔ intervocalically and before /n m l/
    - Waterbottle → [wɔ.ʔə.bɒ.ʔəw]
  - Liverpool English (Scouse): t → h after short, unstressed vowels
    - It, what, not → [ɛh], [ðɐh], [nɔh]
  - Ukrainian: ɣ → ħ in onset position
    - гітара (gitara) → [ħi'tara]
- Pre-glottalization is a strengthening phenomenon, while debuccalization is a weakening phenomenon. Both of which however seem to combine into *höggmæli*.

## Sigurjónsdóttir's BA thesis

- Aimed to describe the nature and behaviour of phenomenon
- Different plosives have different tendencies to debuccalize
  - /t/ by far the most likely
  - /p/ and /k/ were quite similar
- Speakers will most often switch between oral stops and glottal stops
  - None of the speakers scored 100%
  - Each individual therefore has their own tendency of debuccalizing plosives (as described by Árnason (2005:418))
- Primary stress did not seem to be mandatory for debuccalization to appear
  - *Fyrirspurn* would debuccalize just as much as *Árnagarður*: ['firɪ,spʏʔn];  
['auʔna,karðʏr]

## Deletion of /rt/

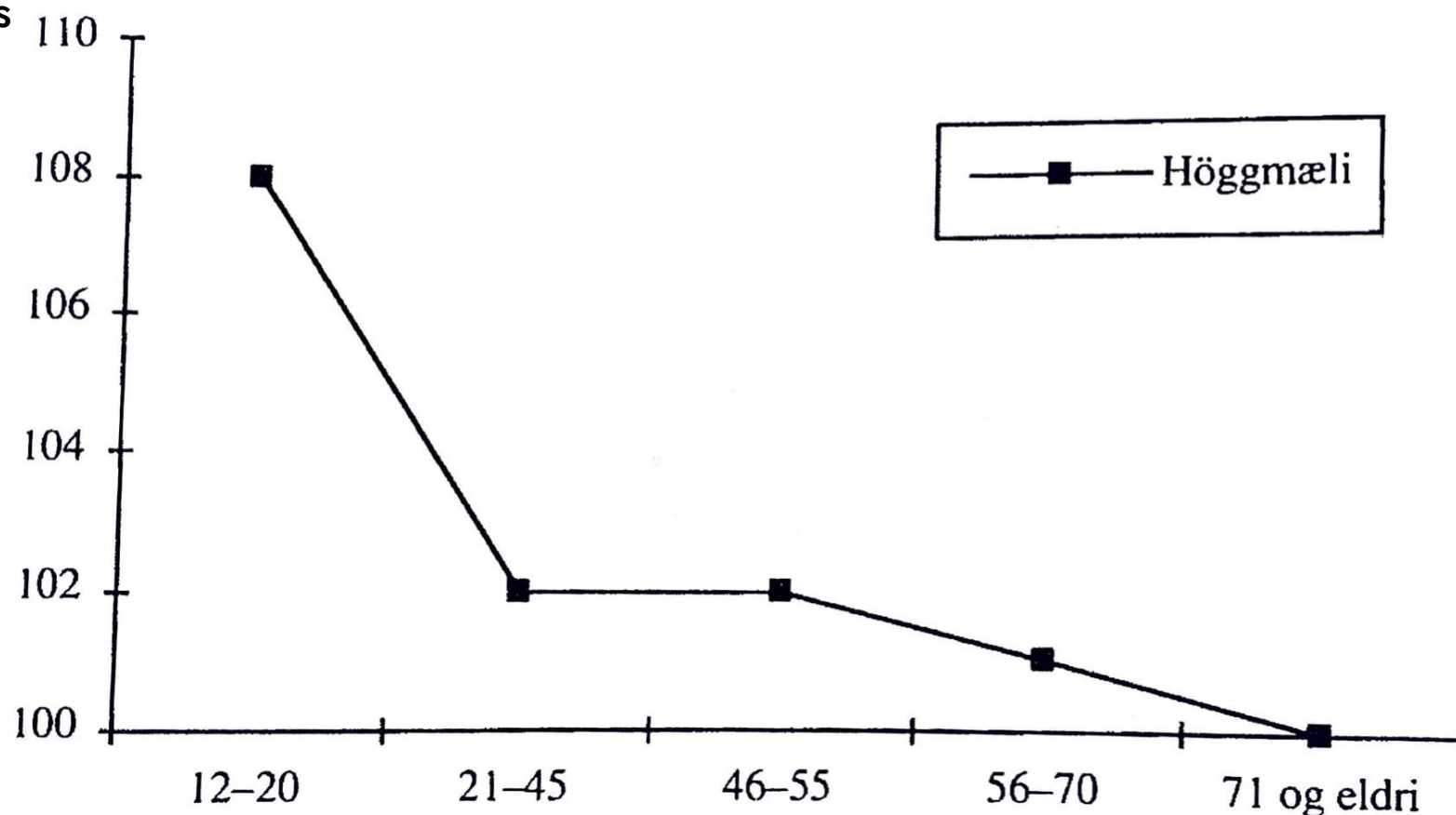
- A dialectal feature, often called *n-framburður*, involves the deletion of /r/ and the epenthesis /t/ in the morphological endings *-arnir*, *-urnar*, *-irnar*
  - Strákarnir [strau:kartnɪr] → [strau:kanɪr] (the boys)
  - Stelpurnar [stɛlpʏrtnar] → [stɛlpʏnar] (the girls)
  - Sólinnar [sou:lɪrtnar] → [sou:lɪnar] (the suns)
- This feature has been associated with the southern regions of Iceland, but in Guðfinnsson's research it was documented in other various places as well (Árnason, 2005:409)

## Deletion of /rt/ in regards to *höggmæli*

- All speakers with tendencies to debuccalize plosives in Sigurjónsdóttir's study (2021) also had a tendency to delete /rt/
  - Both phenomena involve the weakening of plosives, /rt/ deletion is usually totally unstressed
- The relationship between *höggmæli* and *n-framburður* seems to only go one way: speakers with *höggmæli* will most likely also have *n-framburður*, but speakers of *n-framburður* will not necessarily have *höggmæli*.

## Distribution in RÍN

- The graph displays the mean scores for debuccalization in Reykjavík, where it was the strongest.
- The highest possible score is 200, but no participant surpassed 160 (Árnason, 2005:418)
- Despite the low numbers, they indicate that debuccalization may be spreading
- The low numbers also indicate that the variant is very subjective, i.e. speakers have different tendencies to debuccalize





## RQs and hypotheses

- How is *höggmæli* distributed among native Icelandic speakers in regards to age?
  - The numbers in RÍN indicate it should be more common among younger generations
- How is *höggmæli* distributed among native Icelandic speakers in regards to geographical regions?
  - RÍN indicates it to be more common among young people in Reykjavík and the capital region
- Does the distribution seem like age grading or language change?
  - Given that previous studies have shown that the variant is subjective, it should at least not indicate a massive language change in the near future although it could be happening slowly
- How are the relations between *höggmæli* and *n-framburður* (/rt/ deletion), if they are related at all?
  - Based on Sigurjónsdóttir's data (2021), speakers with tendencies to debuccalize will also have a tendency to delete /rt/ in the endings *-irnar*, *-arnar* and *-urnar*.

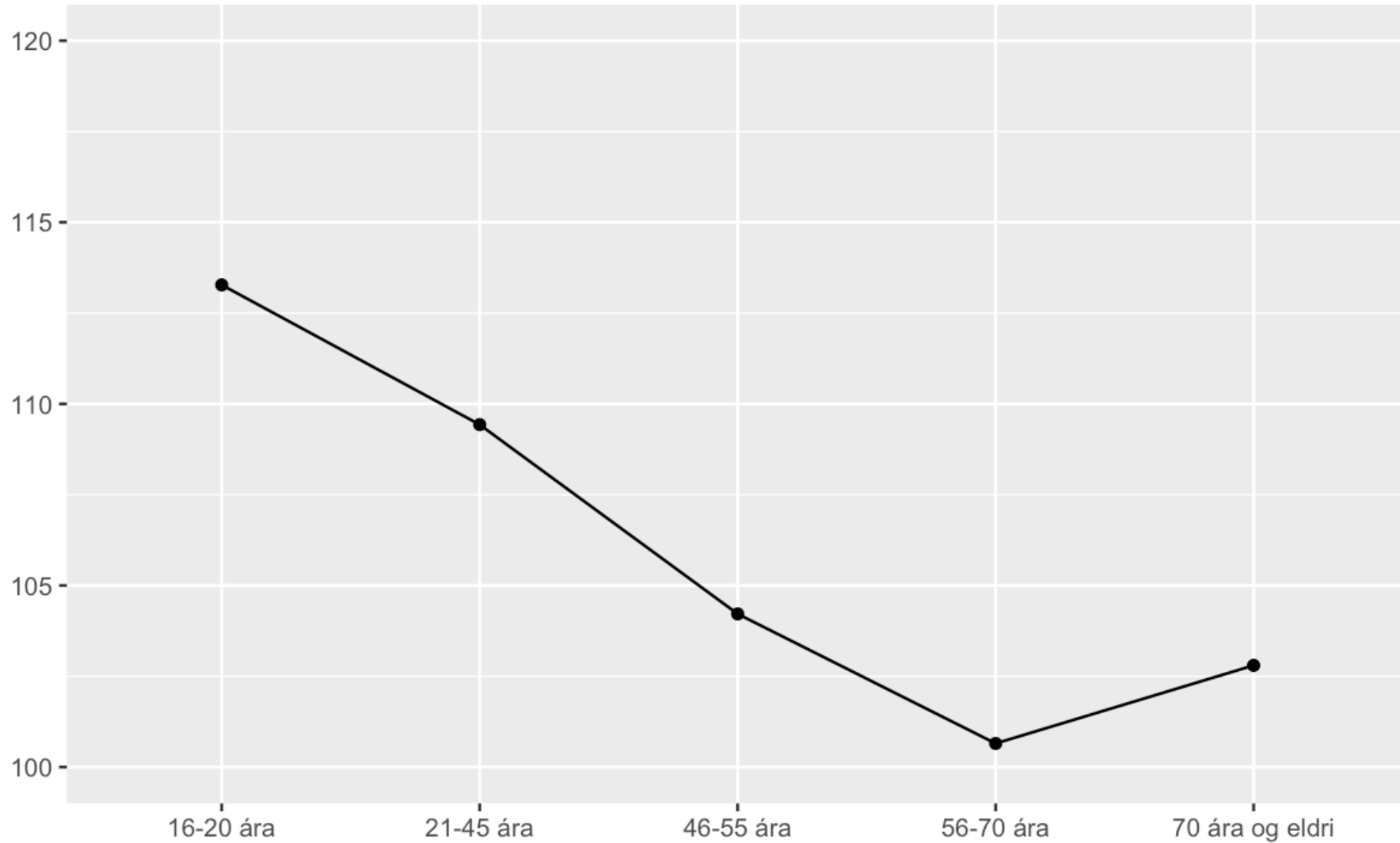
# Methodology

- Recordings collected in an online survey, conducted by Angantýsson and Friðriksson. All participants read out loud a short story.
- The text contains 15 target words in total for debuccalization, most of which have /t/ preceding /n/, and four target words for /rt/ deletion.
  - Debuccalization before /l/ will not be taken into consideration for now to simplify the analysis process, as well as the text doesn't contain enough target words for it.
- Speakers are given scores from 100-200 for each target word, where 100 means no sign of a variant and 200 means appearance of a variant

## Participants

- The current sample of speakers is compiled of 142 speakers
- The goal is to have roughly equal numbers of speakers regarding age and residence (about 20-30 in each age group and geographical group). The final number of total speakers should be around 180-200.
- The youngest age group (16-20 years old) is almost fully analysed
- The numbers in the following discussion **are not the final results**, but they can give an idea of where things are going.

# First results: distribution by age (whole country)



Participant age distribution: 87; 7; 23; 20; 5

# Comparison to RÍN

Whole country (1980)    Whole country (present)

Age group	Debucc. mean	n	Age group	Debucc. mean
12-20	102.84	87	16-20	113.28
21-45	100.75	7	21-45	109.43
46-55	100.74	23	46-55	104.22
56-70	100.64	20	56-70	100.65
71+	100.69	5	71+	102.80

Reykjavík (1980)

Reykjavík (present)

Age group	Debucc. mean	n	Age group	Debucc. mean
12-20	108.04	21	16-20	118.10
21-45	101.92	6	21-45	111.00
46-55	101.56	8	46-55	106.25
56-70	100.21	12	56-70	100.00
71+	101.00	1	71+	100.00

- The younger generations are scoring higher in the present study than the youngest group in RÍN (10 points in 40 years)
- The youngest group in RÍN are ca. 55-63 years old today
  - Those groups have very little signs of debuccalization today, indicates age grading instead of language change? Will be answered when more data has been analysed.

# Comparison to RÍN

Whole country: RePARC    Whole country: RÍN (1980)

n	Age group	Debucc. mean	Age group	Debucc. mean
87	16-20	113.28	12-20	102.84
7	21-45	109.43	21-45	100.75
23	46-55	104.22	46-55	100.74
20	56-70	100.65	56-70	100.64
5	71+	102.80	71+	100.69

Reykjavík: RePARC

n	Age group	Debucc. mean
21	16-20	118.10
6	21-45	111.00
8	46-55	106.25
12	56-70	100.00
1	71+	100.00

Reykjavík: RÍN (1980)

Age group	Debucc. mean
12-20	108.04
21-45	101.92
46-55	101.56
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71+	101.00

- The younger generations are scoring higher in the present study than the youngest group in RÍN (10 points in 40 years)
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# Comparison of regions

## Capital region

n	Age group	Debucc. mean
21	16-20	118.10
6	21-45	111.00
8	46-55	106.25
12	56-70	100.00
1	71+	100.00

## Northern region

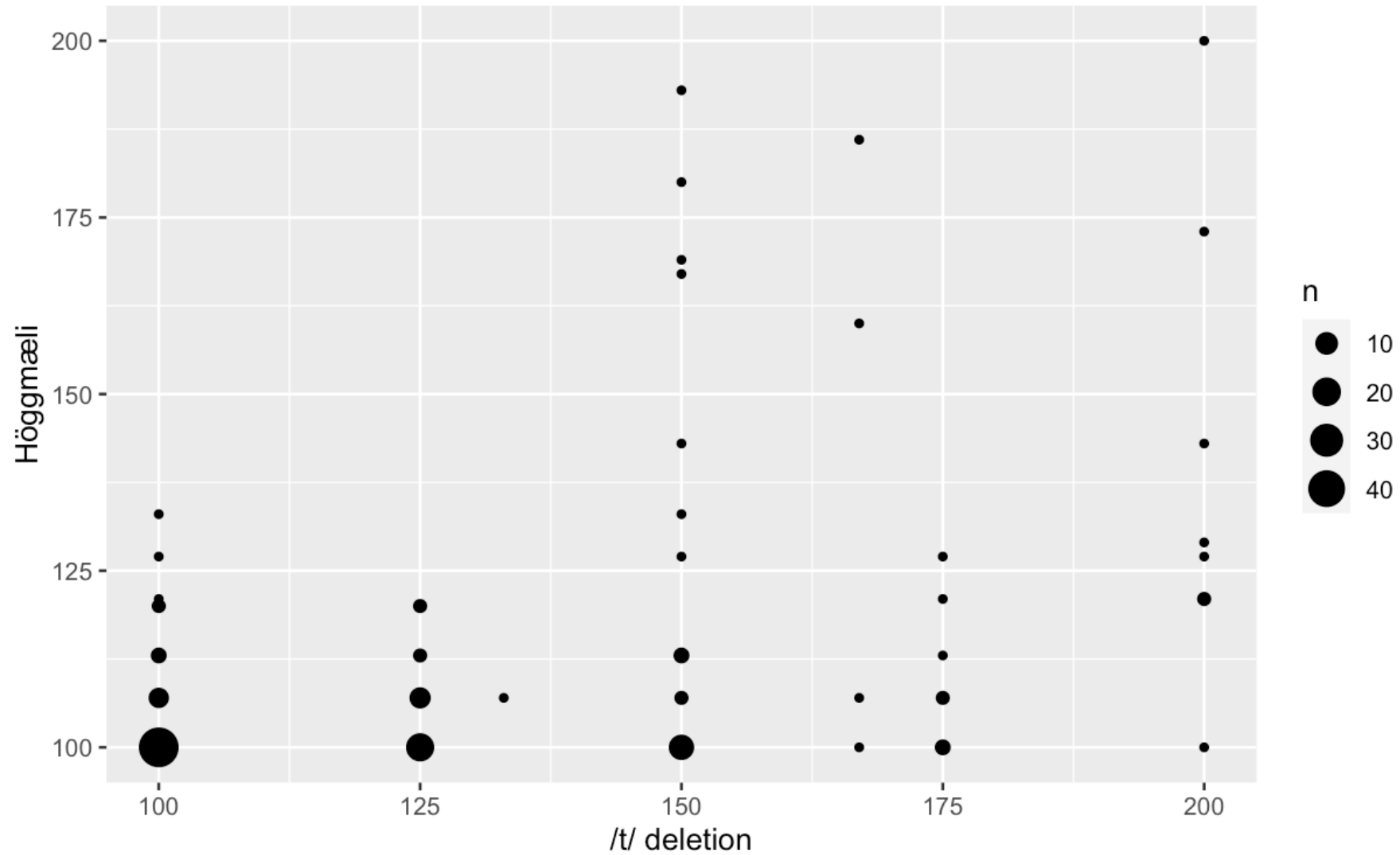
n	Age group	Debucc. mean
30	16-20	109.53
-	21-45	-
3	46-55	109.00
3	56-70	100.00
2	71+	103.50

## South and southeastern region

n	Age group	Debucc. mean
25	16-20	114.96
-	21-45	-
9	46-55	100.00
3	56-70	100.00
1	71+	100.00

- The capital region still scores the highest among the younger generations
- The western region, the west fjords and the east fjords will be left out for now due to lack of analysed data

# Höggmæli and deletion of /rt/





## Conclusions

- The presence of *höggmæli* in a speaker's grammar seems to indicate that the presence of /rt/ deletion is more likely, although the relationship does not go both ways
- *Höggmæli* is more common among younger generations,
  - However, the youngest generation of RÍN does not score as high as adults today
- More data will determine whether the distribution is related to age grading or language change
- *Höggmæli* is still the strongest in the capital region, but the geographical difference might be neutralized
  - Youngest group scores: (CR) 118.10 – (NR) 109.53 – (SR) 114.96

# Bibliography

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